

Field Report: ‘Lived Religion’ in the Context of Migration: The Case of Zoroastrian Women in the USA

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Zoroastrianism is a religion with a long history, which flourished on the basis of the beliefs and practices of ancient Iranian peoples. Perceived to be the oldest monotheistic religion in the world, for centuries it dominated the Middle East, shaping Iranian culture and way of thinking, and during the reign of the Sasanians (224–651) – the last Iranian dynasty before the Arab conquest – it was strictly associated with the state structure. After the Islamisation of the region, only a tiny group maintained the beliefs of their ancestors, either in Iran or in India, where the small community found shelter and adapted themselves to the local society – they are called the Parsis. Today the number of Zoroastrians worldwide is estimated to slightly exceed 100 000, with a strong tendency toward decline – according to their own statistics, between 2004 and 2012 the population decreased by 10%. The largest population centres are India, North America, Iran and Great Britain, and communities are also present in other countries of the Gulf Region, Pakistan as well as Australia and New Zealand (Rivetna 2013, 26).

The North American community drew my attention in particular. It consists of Zoroastrian migrants and their offspring born there, as well as converts of different ethnic origins, and – in contrast to the communities in Zoroastrian “homelands” in Iran, India and Pakistan – grows and expands, strengthening its importance and influences. When it comes to the country of my interest, the United States, the Hart-Celler Act passed here in 1965 resulted in an increase in the number of Indian-born migrants. The first movement of Iranian migrants took place in the period 1950–77, followed by other

waves triggered by the oil price boom and then by the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Hinnells 2005, 428–432). When viewed from a distance, Parsi and Iranian Zoroastrians think of each other as co-believers, but tensions appear when they meet in the diaspora. Zoroastrians originating from Iran, India or Pakistan need to adapt themselves not only to the new social context of the host country, but also to a coexistence with fellow believers that may be culturally very distant. Here the conflicting cultural and religious issues, as different language, rituals or cuisine, become an urgent challenge.

Modern Zoroastrianism is still not widely researched by anthropologists or sociologists of religion. Works that comment on the practices and experiences of the North American Zoroastrians are very limited. There is an extensive, descriptive study of all Zoroastrian diasporas, based on observations and quantitative research by Hinnells (Hinnells 2005) and a qualitative study comparing the identity of Zoroastrians in India, Pakistan, North America and Great Britain by Writer (Writer 1994); however, both are very Parsi-centric, in many cases neglecting the Iranian perspective. There are also a few articles that very generally comment on the life of North American Zoroastrians (E.g. Foltz 2009).

In September of 2019 I received the Fellowship of Kosciuszko Foundation for a research project entitled *‘Lived Religion’ in the Context of Migration: The Case of Zoroastrian Women in the USA*, and over the course of fieldwork I was hosted by the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington. As institutional Zoroastrianism is male-dominated (Cf. Choksy 2002), I found it particularly interesting how female migrants as well as their daughters born in the North America, originating from relatively conservative communities in Iran, India and Pakistan, are transforming the religion beyond the institutional frame through their practices in a transcultural environment, and to what extent they are adapting to local values and way of life.

The research has been designed as an interdisciplinary study, integrating perspectives, knowledge and methods specific to the sociology of religion, ethnology, and Oriental studies. Its theoretical frame is inspired by the concept of “lived religion”. Over recent decades, the sociological study of religion has shifted significantly towards it, drawing attention to the way religion is embedded in the practices of everyday life (Ammerman 2016). Following McGuire’s understanding of “lived religion”, I focus on personal religious experience and expression as a dynamic, multifaceted “amalgam of beliefs



and practices” (McGuire 2008, 4), but with the assumption that they consist of both official and “popular” religious elements. The objective is to explore how Zoroastrianism is being created, observed and articulated by women living in the American diaspora.

The fieldwork involved purposeful sampling strategies to reach women of Iranian, Indian and Pakistani origin for comparison purposes, active in different Zoroastrian associations. I focused on three locations to differentiate the local contexts: a) women living in the territory of Zoroastrians Association of Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana – a very scattered, Parsi-dominated population; (b) women living in more institutionalised, Parsi-dominated community of Chicago, belonging to the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago; (c) Iranian women living in California, members of a few local associations in Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Jose. I have also visited communities in Houston where I talked to local women, as well as Washington DC, where I gave a lecture summering my project at the invitation of the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington.

Sharing the perspective that a narrative frame is especially useful in exploring the everyday manifestations of a “lived religion” (Cf. Ammerman and Williams 2012), I used two techniques to collect data: life story and photo elicitation interviewing. I conducted 60 in-depth interviews in communities of interest, supplemented by a few interviews from Houston. Additionally, I participated in local events. The interviews were conducted in English, with a few in Persian, according to the preference of the interviewees.

This study will contribute to understanding how Zoroastrianism faces the challenges of a pluralistic American society, home of the expanding Zoroastrian diaspora. From a broader perspective it will contribute to understanding how minority religions are shaped by gender in transcultural contexts. It will also expand the study of “lived religion” beyond the most researched groups in this frame: Christians and Muslims (Cf. Ammerman 2016). The transcriptions of the interviews will be analysed, assisted by qualitative research software. Already, judging from a sketchy review of the collected data, some interesting issues have indeed arisen such as intergenerational (in this matter I found the interviews conducted with mothers and daughters from the same family especially interesting), as well as ethnic differences in rituals (Iranian vs. Parsi), and cross-cultural exchange.



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Dr. Paulina NIECHCIAŁ is an assistant professor at the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. She is a Ph.D. holder in sociology, and a MA in both cultural anthropology and Iranian studies. Her main area of research includes the sociology and anthropology of religion, religious minorities, processes of identity building and the contemporary culture and societies of Iran, Afganistan and Tajikistan. Her publications include book entitled *Mniejszość zaratusztriańska we współczesnym Teheranie. O tożsamości zbiorowej w kontekście dominacji szyickiej* (Zoroastrian Minority in Modern Tehran: On Collective Identity in the Context of Shi'a Domination, Nomos 2013) as well as variety of academic articles and book chapters.

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